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Unconditional Surrender

In the light of subsequent history many Americans would like to erase two words from the records recounting the end of World War II. Those words are "unconditional surrender." In the dark days of 1944 and 1945 they represented the policy of the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union in their massive struggle to destroy Hitlerism. Today, however, there is widespread belief that adherence to this slogan prolonged the war and inhibited the restoration of peace.

Interest in this chapter of history has been revived by the recent publication of the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States 1944* (Volume 1, general). Students of history will find in its pages a plethora of documents disclosing peace feelers from Berlin and a stern response from this side: "Unconditional surrender." The documents make clear that the chief architect of the policy was President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In a note to F.D.R. in November, 1944, Prime Minister Churchill commented: "I remain set where you put me on unconditional surrender."

In January, 1944, the Soviet Union raised a question about defining the term because it was being used to arouse fears among the German people and thus to stiffen their will to fight. Similar concern was expressed by Generals Eisenhower and Walter Bedell Smith, by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the OSS, and various officials in the State Department. They urged the President to define the term so that it would not seem to mean complete destruction or total disaster for Germany.

Mr. Roosevelt's reply was that the whole of the German people should be taught a lesson; that while there was no intention of destroying the people, he would give no such assurances in regard to destroying the German nation. At one point F.D.R. did propose a statement, to be issued after D-Day, with the object of encouraging German troops to surrender, but Churchill poured cold water on it.

President Roosevelt cracked down very sharply on a *Handbook of Military Government in Germany* issued by command of General Eisenhower because it indicated that the German economy should be kept in operation, so far as feasible, in areas taken over by the Allied command. In a memorandum to the Secretary of War, Mr. Roosevelt expressed his preference for mere "Army soup kitchens" for the enemy. "The fact that they are a defeated nation, collectively and individually," he wrote, "must be so impressed upon them that they will hesitate to start another war."

Attempts to modify the unconditional surrender formula were complicated, of course, by the punitive attitude of the Soviet Union. Churchill pointed out that the Germans were not very fearful of the postwar treatment they might receive from Britain and the United States. But they were afraid of a Russian occupation and of transportation of their people to slave camps in Siberia. Nothing Britain or the United States could say, he argued, would eradicate that fear.

So the destruction went on to the point of complete collapse, at a heavy cost to victor and vanquished alike, with no alteration of the unconditional surrender policy. Fortunately, the formula was modified somewhat in the case of Japan, although without any acknowledgment in Washington. Though the error of judgment is easier to see in retrospect than in the heat of battle, it ought to be recorded with sufficient emphasis in history to discourage any future demands for unconditional surrender.